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ABSTRACT

The Evergreen State College seems to be working well as a nontraditional college committed to educational change and innovation. It provides a model for interdisciplinary education, developing basic cognitive skills and drawing all disciplines in probing specific problems. The necessary ingredients for a stimulating learning environment based on this model seems to be feasibility, openness, and a genuine feeling of community among all learners. Evergreen begins with no grades, no ranks, no departments, nothing to create a division and competitive learning environment. Beyond this, the school works actively toward building a sense of trust, community, and cooperative exploration. Small Coordination Studies Programs allow personal contact and a sense of group identity. Team building activities further develop this group commitment and even the facilities themselves are arranged to provide contact and interchange. (Author/KE)

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UNIFIED STUDIES -- I:1

REPORT ON THE VISIT TO THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE

OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON

MAY, 1974

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REPORT ON THE VISIT TO THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE
OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON
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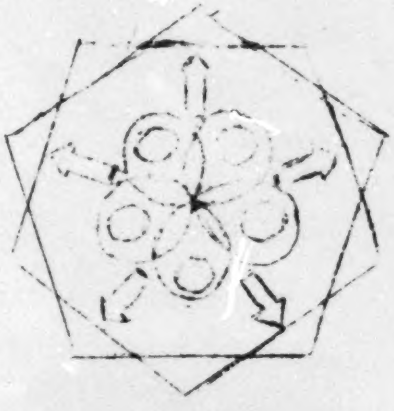
BY WARREN GREELEY, ED TRAVERSO, ELEANOR CIESINSKI
UNIFIED STUDIES PROGRAM



I - INTRODUCTION

The Evergreen State College was founded on legislative mandate as an innovative college which was to be flexible, open to change, and free from rigid traditional structures. In 1971, after a year of planning by the faculty members, the new college, totally organized on an interdisciplinary model, opened. No departments were established, no areas of permanent authority were created. Deans are drawn from the faculty and return to the faculty after three years. There is no academic rank or tenure. All was to remain flexible, on the theory that change is vital to an institution that perceives education as growth and development. Evergreen is what it teaches. Without vested interests or a power elite both faculty and students

are free to pursue fundamental questions facing our society, using all possible approaches, in an atmosphere of trust and respect for others. The most striking first impression of visitors is this open, non-threatening atmosphere. Great emphasis is placed on self motivation within a community of scholars who wish to share their knowledge and skills. There is no grading, no direct penalty for not working, but a sense of responsibility to one's group and oneself keeps most members of the community highly involved in their work. Students from the program often suggest, design, and carry out much of the implementation of succeeding programs. Some concern is expressed about "the Evergreen Syndrome," a feeling of general disorientation which strikes some younger students in their first year as they make the transition from wholly externally-directed and motivated to more or less self-motivated learning. Yet the students themselves seem aware of their own ability to accept this freedom and responsibility, and those who cannot adjust, select themselves out to non-traditional colleges, often to return to Evergreen later when their own goals and self-confidence are more firmly established.

II ORDINATED STUDIES PROGRAMS (the model for our Unified Studies Pro) are the major unit of the school's academic structure. Groups of five faculty and one hundred students join together for a one year study of a particular topic. These programs are either Basic, open to all students, or Advanced, with specific prerequisites. Basic programs for 1973-74were Nature and Society: A Scientific Approach; A Matter of Survival: Ecology in Transition; Man and Nature; The Individual in Contemporary Society; Democracy and Tyranny; Words, Sounds, and Images;

Form and Function; and Native American Studies. Advanced programs were Matter and Motion; The Ecology of Pollution; Power and Personal Vulnerability; Freud and Jung: An Approach to the Humanities; Dreams and Poetry; and America's Music. (Detailed descriptions of these programs appear in the Evergreen State College 1974-75 Bulletin, available in the Unified Studies Resource File.)

Topics for Coordinated Studies Programs are submitted by interested faculty, and sometimes by groups of students, in the Fall semester each year. From the topics submitted the deans, in consultation with the faculty, choose those topics which will best serve the general academic needs of the student body being sure that the disciplines which bear on the theme of a Coordinated Studies Program are represented, that advanced sequences to basic programs are available, the areas neglected in one year will be filled in the next, to allow both continuity and sufficient change. It is possible for a program to run for only one or two quarters, but most are scheduled for a full academic year.

Once topics have been chosen and a coordinator selected (usually the faculty member who submitted the original proposal) other faculty members are assigned to the team, according to the program's needs for representation from different disciplines. In effect, wholly new teaching teams are formed each year, so that faculty eventually have the opportunity to work with all other faculty members and to share the knowledge and skills of all different disciplines. The administrative responsibility of overseeing the different programs is divided among six deans. Yet each program is autonomous and retains full control over its budgets and facilities

as well as content and structure.

Program planning is initiated in the winter and spring, with basic program components designated, reading lists for coordinated seminars drawn up and various content options determined by the middle of spring semester. At that time, program descriptions are made available for student registration, and "The Living Catalog," a videotape of faculty teams discussing their projected programs, is prepared to assist students in making their choices. Suggested sequences of programs are also made along disciplinary lines, to aid those students who wish to retain a clear disciplinary focus in their integrated work. Students are registered for programs, as for the school itself, on a first come basis. In this way students are evenly distributed among all programs.

At present, program planning is interrupted during the summer, although the school has applied for grant money to cover a summer planning period. In September the faculty return three weeks before classes start to finish detailed planning.

The program begins for students with a one week orientation period in which all program members go to an off-campus retreat location (usually a camp) to develop a sense of community within the program and to begin to share knowledge and skills. Students, faculty and administrators all emphasized the importance of this team-building period to the success of a program. Once firm commitment to and trust in other members of the group is established, the group's learning goals and the means of achieving them are more easily defined, and it becomes less likely that people will not do their share or will pull back from the group's work along the way. We

have decided to incorporate a shorter two - three day retreat, with specific team-building components, into our program.

The need for this sense of community is also recognized administratively at Evergreen in the assigning of facilities to a program. Each year the new program faculty are assigned adjoining offices in an area which also includes the seminar rooms, a lecture room, and student lounge space for the program. This encourages constant informal sharing and exchange of ideas with learning seen as a continual and on going process rather than something that takes place in a closed off, two hour segment of time. The library and media services are also housed in the same building, so that resources are easily available.

Within the program twenty students are represented by one faculty advocate who supervises their work for the year, prepares their evaluations, advises them, etc.; this close personal contact is a major factor in helping students to define and meet personal learning goals and to find a clear direction for their study. These twenty students meet with their faculty advocate in their coordinated studies seminars, where the weekly program of lecture and reading material is discussed. The whole coordinated studies group joins for weekly lecture and media presentations, and students select from a variety of other seminars offered by the other members of the program's faculty team in more specialized interest areas. Field work experiences are also available. Again, the structure itself is very similar to our Unified Studies design.

The philosophy of change that underlies the school informs the particular programs as well. Schedules change, topics are redefined,

assignments are altered, more congenial meeting places are found constantly. It is for this reason that the official Bulletin describes only the programs that were offered for the past year, not those being designed for the coming year. Student feedback on a daily and weekly basis throughout the program period provides significant alteration in the design and allows for real student participation in goals and planning. In a sense the success of all Coordinated Studies Programs is thus assured, since any aspect of the program which is not working, nor aiding in the realization of group and individual learning goals, is altered until it does. Unfortunately the necessity of gaining prior approval for our detailed program design from many departments and committees at BSC with specific course equivalencies suggested will eliminate much of this flexibility which would be so ideal in our Unified Studies Program.

One extremely important feature of the Evergreen Coordinated Studies Program is the weekly faculty seminar. Because the college is totally interdisciplinary in philosophy, a secondary goal appears to be the creation of true interdisciplinarians. Rather than merely having each faculty member present his area of expertise to the students, a real effort is made to share each individual's disciplinary approach with the other members of the team, so that the maximum cross-fertilization can take place. Thus the literature representative in the Drama and Poetry program learned the tools of dream interpretation from the psychologist and thepsychologist learned Middle English in their study of Chaucer's dream vision poetry. The advantages of this approach are not only the intellectual stimulation of new methods and approaches drawn from other disciplines, but also a

better understanding of the learning process itself, as faculty, as well as students, share in it. Students are invited to observe the faculty seminars, where they can see this cooperation and show of skills toward the understanding of particular scholarly problems. The sense of a true learning community is fostered here.

A secondary advantage of the faculty seminar is that some faculty have had a chance to share their ideas with their colleagues. They are better able to step back and really listen to and guide the students' learning in the Coordinated Studies Seminars. Again, the importance of this program feature was stressed by everyone we talked to at Evergreen and we have decided to incorporate a faculty seminar into our program structure.

During our stay at Evergreen we visited several different Coordinated Studies Programs, attending different program components and talking with many faculty and students. Some of the strengths and weaknesses they saw in the overall program design were as follows:

1. The constant turnover of teams prevents stagnation, but a yearly rotation may place too heavy a burden on the faculty. Many faculty expressed the difficulty of designing a new program while teaching another for the first time and felt that repeating programs a second year would allow new programs to be designed during the second year of the old program, after the problems were worked out.

2. The interdisciplinary approach demands a great deal of energy from the faculty who need some time to return to their own specialities and renew themselves. (At Evergreen this is provided to some extent by

the Group Contract and Individual Contract described below.)

3. Both faculty and students stressed the need for a counselor outside ofthe program who could provide a detached listening post and provide objective advice for intra-program problems. At Evergreen the deans were much trusted and seemed to fill this function adequately.

4. Students saw close personal contact and attention to helping students learn to become self directed and motivated as essential ingredients of Basic programs, and some had designed a Basic program around these specific criteria.

5. A strong Coordinated Studies Program provides a total experience for the students involved. While scheduled contract hours are roughly equivalent to those of a traditional program, the students we spoke to all spent most of their time on program activities. Most students spent the full-day, every day on campus, and attended evening activities as well. The time spent appeared to be purposeful (music is a serious side interest for many Evergreen students). No one hung around the cafeteria. This was most impressive in a school which allows so much freedom from a traditional schedule.

6. The Coordinated Studies Program which seemed most successful were those which had clear objectives. Participants were able to better focus their own energies when they had a clear understanding of overall goals and direction. Our own sense of the need for a strong unifying theme was reinforced by this observation.

Several alternatives to the Coordinated Studies Programs also exist at Evergreen. Group Contracts of twenty students to one faculty (or forty to two faculty) can take place for one, two or three quarters, and allow a more specialized focus. Often a Coordinated Studies Program will, in its third quarter, break into several Group Contracts as people move out from the pursuit of a particular disciplinary objective. Most Group Contracts are proposed and selected in the fall, in the same manner as Coordinated Studies Programs.

Individual Contracts can also be drawn up between a student and a faculty member for one to three quarters of work. This allows the student a high degree of specialization. Some faculty members will have only Individual Contracts for a year, while others will take on one or two in their specialities in addition to their Coordinated Studies or Group Contract Work. Often Individual Contracts are negotiated in conjunction with Field Work and allow a portion of the student's career to be spent in an off-campus pursuit. Other members of the college staff can also negotiate Individual Contracts, so that a student might spend a quarter gaining practical experience in the counseling office, for example.

Modules have recently been instituted as a means of providing a disciplinary skills component to other programs. A six week disciplinary module can be taken in conjunction with any of the other programs, with the student negotiating to spend a specified portion of his time working within the module. Beginning next year a student may also choose to, and/or be advised to, spend a portion of his time working at the Learning Resource Centerewhere tools are available for developing basic reading

and writing skills. Some skills workshops have been incorporated into Coordinated Studies Programs, but this is not a constant feature.

Students may change from one Coordinated Studies Program to another or to a Group or Individual Contract at any point with the consent of the faculty involved. Credit is assigned on the basis of time spent in the program.

EVALUATION

No grades are given at Evergreen. Credit is given for completion of the work of a program, partial credit for partial completion. At the end of each program or contract students write an evaluation of their own work, detailing what they did within the program. The faculty sponsor also writes a detailed evaluation of the student's work and suggests various traditional courses for which equivalent credit might be given, in case the student transfers or needs to apply credits towards graduate school or some other specialized program. Transcripts consist of excerpts from all of a student's evaluations.

All students also evaluate their faculty sponsors, while the sponsors write self-evaluations of their work in particular programs. These evaluations are then discussed by the two people involved. This evaluation process is conducted in a preliminary way at several points in the program, but only the final evaluation letters, after the program is completed, become part of the student's and faculty member's permanent files. This dialogue allows change and improvement on both sides, and there appears to be little disagreement over the final evaluation report. Evergreen tries to promote learning based on trust and openness, and evaluation letters are not used as a threat to force people to learn.

Based on our observation at Evergreen, we have decided to supplement the grading contracts in our program design with evaluation letters, to be written preliminarily at the end of the first month's case study, and in a final form at the end of the semester. This should give the students more meaningful feedback than grades alone, and soften the big club effect of a grading system.

The same evaluation process goes on between the faculty and the administration, with letters evaluating oneself and the other, and a dialogue on all letters. One of our team members sat in on a faculty-dean evaluation session and was again impressed by the open communication that took place. The focus was on ways in which the work of each could be improved, but the spirit was not one of negative criticism. Some of the general problems seen were: that faculty were working too hard and needed to set personal limits to prevent getting burned out; that both students and faculty must learn to set realistic goals and avoid projects that are too ambitious; that there is a danger of guilt replacing fear and praise as motivations since one's expectations of oneself are generally greater than those held by others. These are problems that we will also have to watch out for in the Unified Studies Program. But both the dean and the faculty members expressed the idea that as the members of the Evergreen community have become more comfortable, they are better able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, to accept the strengths of others and their own limits in a non-defensive way, and to really utilize each person's talents in the most productive way.

III - EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

At Evergreen, educational services required by all programs were most efficiently conducted in one center. We will attempt to incorporate these services into the Unified Studies Program itself.

Learning Resources Center--

This center was designed as a tool which students of all programs could use to develop basic skills. Programs can refer students to the center, where reading machines and a variety of reading materials are available, and reading and writing workshops are conducted. The center staff also conduct workshops within programs, gearing the reading and writing skills workshops to the specific course readings and assignments. Up to this point the Learning Resources Center has not been fully utilized, and its status is now being changed to the equivalent of other school programs so that students may contract to do their work at the center for a specific period of time.

Up to now writing workshops conducted by Peter Elbow (Writing Without Teachers) have been more important to the development of writing skills at Evergreen, and his experience was more directly related to our Unified Studies Program workshops. The philosophy behind writing workshops at Evergreen accords with the philosophy of the school as a whole. Writing is a task, not a course for which one is graded. It is important to get writing tasks done as efficiently as possible, and to communicate as effectively as possible. The effect of one's writing on others, the ability to accurately convey one's ideas is a primary consideration. In small

groups students share their writing, and react to that writing, consider how well the idea was conveyed and how to convey it more clearly. Students build trust for other members of their workshop and share in helping each other to write effectively. Faculty are trained in workshops where they themselves must write and go through the same sharing of response process. In this way the red pencil mentality is reduced, the vulnerability of the writer is understood, and feedback on how written communication can be improved is given supportively and constructively. Such practical tasks as self-evaluations are completed with group response. As a result, workshops are genuinely welcomed by the students as an aid to their learning, not dreaded as composition courses so often are. Our observation of Evergreen's writing workshops will significantly affect the philosophy and design of our Unified Studies Program Workshops.

Media Services--

The media services center is located next to the library and functions as a significant support activity to all educational programs. A wide range of equipment from 35MM cameras to video tape equipment is available to all students and faculty on a loan basis. There are definite economies of scale associated with a large center because a variety of equipment can be made available and repair facilities are feasible. The center is widely used because of its accessibility and large choice of equipment.

IV - ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

Our visit to Evergreen made it clear that a great deal of administrative support is necessary for a successful program, to free faculty

time for planning and teaching. In the Unified Studies Program we must take on the duties of administrative staff as well, and so, to get all of the other information we needed we had to talk with a variety of support offices.

Admissions--

The Evergreen State College generally admits students on a first come, first serve basis. Students are asked to complete a supplemental admissions form which asks the student to define his/her goals, how Evergreen might not meet them, what adjustments he/she anticipates, reactions to evaluations instead of grades, etc. If the completed form indicates that the student does not really understand Evergreen's approach to learning, the student is asked to rewrite certain parts of the form and to come in for an interview. These students whose forms indicate serious skills deficiencies are asked for additional information and recommendations. Seventy-five per cent of all applications are accepted outright. The supplemental admissions form has not proven to have any statistical validity as a predictor of success at the school, but it does insure that the students have a general understanding of the nature of education at Evergreen. We had designed a similar application form for the Unified Studies Program, but after our visit to Evergreen we decided also to only use it supplementally, to be sure that students who applied for the program really understood what it was about. We decided that there was no real validity to such a form as a criterion for admission to a new program, and that traditional predictors of college success, such as college boards, were not really applicable to a non-traditional program.

We are now accepting the first 100 students to apply who have been admitted or readmitted to Boston State.

The Evergreen State College has a 25% per year drop out rate. Most of these students drop out because they do not yet have a clear focus, and they are generally the younger students. A large number reapply when their own goals are clearer. Since we are appealing primarily to students who have dropped out and wish to be readmitted, to students who have already been attending school part-time in PCE, and to transfer students, all of whom are older than the average freshman, we do not anticipate as many drop-outs. The information from Evergreen confirmed our initial hypothesis that these were the students who would be most successful in this type of program.

We were also interested in what happened to students on the other end, as they graduate from Evergreen, since we are often asked whether work in Unified Studies will be accepted toward graduate school or jobs. So far 87% of these Evergreen graduates seeking jobs were placed in jobs that they considered satisfactory. All these who have applied to law school or medical school have been accepted and graduate school placements have also been high. In general, it is felt at Evergreen that the application of knowledge and skills toward the understanding of a particular problem is better preparation for advanced work or careers than most traditional programs provide. In addition, a student interested in a specific career can usually negotiate a contract for internship in that area, allowing for a more specialized preparation than the ordinary student would receive Self-motivation and the ability to carry on independent projects are

valuable qualities in the graduate school or job market. Finally, a transcript made up of detailed evaluation reports giving specific information about a student's work is far more valuable in evaluating his/her suitability for a job or graduate program than a series of letter grades.

Registration--

From the registrar we obtained sample transcripts. Again the value of these detailed records in assessing a student's work was emphasized. The registrar also stressed the value of flexibility in the registration process so that students can have the option of shifting to a different program at any point if the present one does not meet his/her educational needs.

Counseling

No diagnostic testing is done on new Evergreen students, although a variety of tests are available for those who request them. An orientation week is planned for new students to acquaint them with the campus and with the overall academic structure of the school. Coordinated Studies Programs also have an orientation week, off campus, and this is seen as most significant to the student's adaptation. The program group is generally the center for the student's social as well as academic life, especially within the first year. Counseling services focus on small group work, helping students deal with new stresses and focus their personal educational goals more clearly. Some of this function will be filled by our Values and Goals Clarification Workshops.

We were also interested in the question of how many Evergreen students work and how this affects their participation in programs. Over one-third of the students work on campus, mostly in work-study jobs. This is a great advantage since work hours can be scheduled to fit with other activities and work assignments are generally made in the student's area of interest. There were no figures for off-campus jobs but it was felt that most employers understood that the Evergreen student's program demanded flexible hours and were willing to adjust working hours, so their off-campus jobs did not conflict with a student's program.

Facilities

Each Coordinated Studies Program is assigned to one area of the library building. Faculty move to offices within the designated area, as does a program secretary and seminar rooms, large lecture rooms and open lounge areas are all clustered within the area and reserved for the use of the program. Specific room scheduling is all done within the program itself, allowing complete flexibility as specific program needs arise. But much of the real learning takes place in informal exchanges, for as students and faculty share space they share ideas. Media and library services are nearby.

Financial Office

Because The Evergreen State College is in the Washington State System it must comply with State accounting procedures. For that reason not much was learned that was useful to the Unified Studies Program. Each of the coordinated studies programs is responsible for its own budget. Funds are requested by the program, and once allocated they are spent by the program faculty within certain state guidelines.

Administrative Offices

The most interesting thing we discovered from the deans and the Provost was their view of their own role. Essentially they saw themselves as assisting in the learning process, as smoothing the way by taking care of all non learning oriented tasks so that each program could focus totally on the issue to be tackled. Moreover, all administrators saw themselves as providing an outside listener to whom all program members could go to discuss problems and conflicts within the program, an outside arbitrator. Again, an atmosphere of trust and support with no fear of reprisal was necessary in order for administrators to effectively play this role. And each of our discussions with faculty and students reinforced the fact that this trust did exist, that an administrator was someone you could talk to about problems with a program, a student, a teacher, without fear of harming the other person. An interesting sidelight was that little campus directed political activity existed at Evergreen, although many of the students and faculty had been members of an active opposition at other schools. Both students and faculty felt that they held power and control over their part of the educational process. The sense of community and common interest was very strong, and political activism was directed off campus, to the less enlightened society at large.

V - CONCLUSIONS

As a non traditional college, committed to educational change and innovation the Evergreen State College seems to be working. It provides a model for interdisciplinary education, developing basic cognitive skills and drawing on all disciplines in probing specific problems.

Its success can be attributed to many factors in the specific design but also to a more general philosophy and attitude. The nesessary ingredients for a stimulating learning environment based on this model seem to be flexibiltiy, openness, and a genuine feeling of comjunity among all learners. No potnetially fruitful approach to a problem is rejected because it falls outside of a preconceived plan, and all learners are encouraged to seek answers wherever they might find them, to share their learning with others, to work together to find solutions. This is radically different from the compoarrentalized learning of most schools, where students, faculty, and whole departments must compete against each other rather than sharing, and cooperating: where the immediate goals are grades, promotions, class quotas rather than the study of important issues and the solution of human problems: where the learning is oriented towards acquiring specific content rather than learning processes which can be applied in many different contexts where, even at best, there is little cross fertilization or sharing of ideas outside of one's own content specialty. Evergreen begins with no grades, no ranks, no departments, nothing to create a divisive and competitive learning environment. But beyond this the school works actively towards buidling a sense of trust and community and cooperative exploration.

Small Coordinated Studies Programs allow personal contact and a sense of group identity, team building activities further develop this group commitment and even the facilities themselves are arranged to provide maximum contact and interchange. Because the programs are autonomous and can be altered at any time without outside authorization, students and faculty can pursue whatever questions arise, so that the design of

the program is organic and grows with the learners themselves.

We have tried to create this same learning environment in the Unified Studies Program. We began with a similar model, 100 students, five faculty from different disciplines focusing on one unifying topic for a year's study. We've requested specific rooms for program use, although even with them our facilities would be less than adequate. We have incorporated into our design, based on the Evergreen visit, such team building components as the retreat and the faculty seminar. Yet we are limited by the specific demands of a traditional college. We must give grades and these grades must be for specific credit equivalencies approved by the individual departments represented in the program. Even if we focus on written evaluation of a student's work within the program, the student will not be wholly removed from a competitive grading system. Since prior departmental approval must be sought for each studnet's work in credit equivalencies, there will be little room to alter the program as it progresses, to investigate new tangents as they appear, to adapt the program components to a student's needs, to eliminate what doesn't work and substitute something that does. Since some of our faculty team members are on the 03 account and will only be allowed to teach part time, we will have to run the program with a larger and less cohesive team of people who will not be able to make the same commitment to the program as full time people.

That these specific problems exist is an indication of greater problems with regard to innovation in the school as a whole, and raises the question of whether an experimental program such as the Unified Studies Program can succeed and meet its objectives in a non supportive environment.

It is clear that a philosophy supportive of change and differences is the foundation of Evergreen's success. An atmosphere of trust and openness must exist before any significant educational change can take place. Boston State must redefine its educational services to the community and create new ways to deliver them. The problem is how to alter the present environment tosupport new approaches to education.

In our planning of the Unified Studies Program we have consulted all interested representatives of the student body, the faculty and the administration and have received much useful support and criticism. However, the approval process for a new program, which requires the vote of innumerable committees and entire departments, any one of which could veto the entire program, is unwieldy. Time better spent on substantive program planning was used up in this process, and, as approval became the first and most necessary goal, important aspects of the program had to be modified in order to gain that approval.

A simpler process, perhaps a special projects committee, is needed to support the development of new programs at BSC if new programs are to exist.

Evergreen shows that at least one new approach to education can succeed in a supportive environment. Perhaps the Open College projects will pave the way for further innovation at BSC.

Materials from the Evergreen State College, including catalog and bulletins, sample admission forms, transcripts, evaluations, and the March 1974 self-study report, are available in the Unified Studies Program Resource File.